

MAKING SENSE OF ASCENSION

Acts 1: 1 – 11 May 16, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Ascension Sunday is the last Sunday of the Easter Season. Resurrection is the beginning of Easter Season and Ascension Sunday is the end of the season. So, the two seem tied together. The witnesses of the resurrection and the ascension had difficulty translating these experiences to the written page. Words come up short, wanting, in these attempts to describe these events. Resurrection stories show Jesus eating fish and appearing through closed doors.

Today Jesus strangely disappears to people who have known him for years.

So, when the church proclaims ascension as a part of the gospel, what is our intent? What is at stake theologically? when we say that Jesus not only raised from the dead, but ascended also? The problem is easy enough to define. We do not, as matter of fact, believe that Jesus ended his earthly ministry with the equivalent of a rocket launch, rising a few hundred miles above the earth. Nor do we think Jesus was the first to be “beamed up” to use the term from Star Trek. Part of the problem comes from the profound change in worldview that occurred with the coming of modern science. Christians never really did believe that planet earth is flat. But until Copernicus, nearly everyone believed that planet Earth was firmly fixed at the center of the universe and that the celestial bodies, sun, moon and stars, all rotated around us. For the gospel writers to say that Jesus goes up – well, it was mysterious, but not wholly inconceivable. Their construct of the world was a flat plain, where they lived. Underneath was a place where spirits dwelt. Up above was a dome, bowl shaped sky, and sticking in this sky were the stars, sun and moon. So, Jesus could just go up there. The great religious art of medieval Europe showed Jesus just above the clouds. The people could stand and point up, and say that Jesus went there.

Some people look toward the heavens for stars, some look for new moons, some look for airplanes. These early Christians looked toward the heavens because they believed Jesus was there. Thanks to Copernicus going “up” is no longer a coherent idea. Today there is no more “up” if by that we mean a fixed spatial location always over our heads.

One problem the ascension did address was a problem about the resurrection. If Jesus had been raised, then where was he? Why didn’t people see him walking around? He wasn’t raised just to grow old and then die again. There had to be some means of getting Jesus out of town. The ascension provides it – the people stood openmouthed as they watched

Jesus being carried off into the sky.

To me, a more serious question is “Where or what was Jesus raised to?” He did not

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simply go up into the sky. And I think it doesn't help to say Jesus is simply moved into the future. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes that "Jesus is raised into the coming kingdom of God." To me, that is helpful, especially as we look to next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday – the coming of the Spirit of God among us.

The disciples are standing there, mouths open, as Jesus is lifted up. These two men in white robes stood by them. They asked the disciples "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus will come back to you in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Well, yes, Jesus will come back. Truth always comes back. I think the mistake is the idea that Jesus will come back in this same mysterious way he goes up. The presence of the Spirit of God that was in Jesus does not come to us by looking in the clouds. The two men don't seem to want to spend much time trying to comfort or counsel by dwelling on the disciples' loss. They are urging the disciples to get on with the task of this Kingdom of God that Moltman is talking about.

In our text today, just before this ascension, the disciples were asking Jesus "Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" For these disciples, the political reconstitution of Israel is important to them. That notion that the nation will be returned to the prominence as in the time of King David will surely be the time of God's favor to them.

Ascension makes sense to me in our understanding of this Kingdom of God. How are we as a people, as a congregation? to understand ourselves as a part of this Kingdom? Recently, I spoke at a church who had read about Pilgrim and our moving to a new home in the newspaper. Here is the gist of their understanding of themselves as a congregation: "We are a small congregation now. Our church split and many members left. We desperately need young families to join our church if we are to survive. We are all old and we need these young members." They are looking for a kingdom of survival. Some congregations are looking for a kingdom of activity. "We have more than 30 opportunities each week for people to come and serve. We are busier than ever. A kingdom of activity. I suspect that many congregations are seeking a kingdom of consumption. They are constantly striving to provide bigger, better and more entertaining worship services. Those who come to worship can feel good about the performance of the music and the pastor. Is the Kingdom of God a kingdom of survival? Is it really a kingdom of activity? Is the Kingdom of God to be equated with our idea of consumption – ever bigger and better?"

When we ask Jesus when God will restore the Kingdom to the good old days – the way we think the church ought to be, or the way that best suits us, - Jesus points us not to the future, but to the power of this Spirit of God in the present. Where do we find this spirit

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present in our day? I think this story about ascension points us from looking to the clouds, to looking at the work of the Kingdom of God among us.

I keep thinking about that parable of the last judgment. All these nations are gathered before God. What is the answer to the questions that really matter? I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me water. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me.

How does Jesus come to us? Well, not as we stand and look into the clouds. This Kingdom of God is present in our compassion. It is present in our generous sharing of what we have to offer to others. It is present in our demonstration of the inclusive nature of God's love as we know it. It is present in our welcome of those pushed to the edge of society simply because they are not like us. These disciples looked to the clouds because they located Jesus there. But the ascension story ends with the God's calling us as disciples to be alive in this Kingdom of God that is present among and in us.

